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CNN Newsroom with Brooke Baldwin (Interview with John King)

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CNN 03/31/2020 12:39:17 PM: >> Thank you for taking the time today. To the point we just heard there. What are your complications, what is your plan and when you hear from commanders on vessels saying I need to get these Sailors off my ship. How do you weigh that with national security concerns? What will happen?

A/SN: Thanks John. It is a balancing act and we are working hard and trying to make that balance acceptable. I heard about the letter this morning and I know that our command and organization has been aware of this for 24 hours. We have been working the last several days to move those Sailors off the ship and to get them into combinations on Guam. The problem is that Guam does not have enough beds right now. We are talking to the government there to see if we can get some hotel space – create some tent-like facility there. But, we don't disagree with the CO on that ship. We are doing it in a methodical way. It's not the same as a cruise ship. That ship has aircraft on it and armor on it. We have to be able to fight a fires if there are fires onboard the ship. We have to run a nuclear power plant, so there are a lot of things we have to do on that ship that makes it a little different and unique. We are managing it and we are working through it and we are taking all the input and we appreciate all the input both from the CO of the ship and the medical command on the ship. We'll work on those issues immediately.

CNN: You have a tough job and incredibly tough job. You are going to face some criticism and deal with things as you go. I want you to listen to your boss here, Secretary of Defense, as you are dealing with this pandemic and you are the leader of an organization and you are trying to help your workers if you will. Those Sailors on these ship, you also have a job to protect the American people. Listen to secretary of defense as he says we'll figure this out.

SD: As this virus ramps up and spread, we'll see more impact of persons in our ranks. I am confident that while it may have some impact on readiness it will not affect our ability to conduct our national security missions both at home and abroad. I am confident of the fitness, the health of our force and the commander's ability to make sure they manage our resources and people.

CNN: In your case as the secretary of the Navy, your challenge is more complicated because the Navy is so critical to projecting American strength, the visibility of American strength around the world whether we are talking about the Persian Gulf or South China Sea area. Your men and women living in the most cramped environment because of the bunks and below decks on those ships. How do you balance? I need to protect my force with I need to protect America?

A/SN: Well, that's part of the challenge of my job. That's what we are trying to do. The people, the Navy and Marine Corps team - our teammates out there, they are all over the world. We have one mission and that's to defend the nation. This is a unique circumstance and we'll work through it and we'll try to maintain that proper balance making sure our friends and allies and our adversaries understand that we are not standing down the watch. We still have the responsibility to protect the seas, our friends and allies around the world. We have to adjust the best way we possibly can to do that.

CNN: Do you have the supplies you need? I want to read a little bit, this is Brian Clark – A retired submarine officer – speaking to the Wall Street Journal. It is hard to disinfect the ship of that size. There are so many surfaces where the virus can be living and you just can't have everyone leave the ship for two weeks. Every governor in America and everyone is dealing with this. You have unique circumstances because of the size of the vessels. Do you have as we listen to all of these governors and the president and FEMA, do you have a supply surge underway to help the ships?

A/SN: We do in terms of the situation of teddy Roosevelt. There are initial capacity and Sailors on that ship was limited to about 200 a day. We are going to start ramping that up by sending those tests out to other areas so we can test them more quickly. The key is to make sure that we can get a set of crew members that can man those critical functions on the ship and make sure they are clean and get them back on while we take the other crew members off. That's a process we are going through. It is very methodical. We are absolutely accelerating it as we go. I think there are things that are happening within the last 24 hours that came after some of those letters and some of the comments that were made. We are working at it, we are in constant communication with that ship. My own office, I was talking with the CO yesterday, we are engaged and concerned about it and we are taking all the appropriate steps.

CNN: Let me ask you in closing, you are standing on the west coast in front of one of your medical ships and there is another one in the east coast. They were mobilized incredibly quickly, most of what I believe neither ship will treat covid-19 patients but they are critical to offer support services for other patients on both in the Los Angeles area and the New York area. Just talk a bit about the task of getting those up and running so quickly.

A/SN: Well, I think this is what we expect our Navy to do when we are given a challenge and do it as quickly as possible. That's what's happening with these ships. I asked the question back in early February how they might be used and the timeline we are not acceptable and we started ramping up some of the procedures for that. When we got on the path to going the president and others said let's get in it to New York faster and particularly the Comfort and the accelerated that schedule by a couple of weeks which has been phenomenal. We are really proud of the Sailors on the ship. The nation should take some comfort that the United States Navy and Marine Corp are here and they are here to help and unload the burden on some of these hospitals dealing with covid-19.

CNN: Mr. Thomas Modly, thank you so much, I wish you luck in the days and weeks you have ahead getting the men and women on the front line.

A/SN: appreciate your time. Thank you, John.

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